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SUBJECT: WEEKLY ELECTION ROUNDUP

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM B. WOOD;
REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (U) Election updates for the week of February 20-28.

2. (C) Uribe to Campaign for Congressional Majority: In an effort to assuage concerns that he has not sufficiently promoted congressional supporters, President Uribe officially launched his campaign on February 27. This move will allow the President to publicly support the six pro-Uribe parties: the Conservative Party, Cambio Radical, Alas Equipo Colombia, Colombia Democratica, the U Party, and La Colombia que Sonamos. His first campaign event will be March 1 with the Conservative Party. Uribe's support for these parties is an effort to secure a Congressional majority for his second term. U Party leader Juan Manuel Santos acknowledged to polcouns on February 20 that strong support for Uribe was not trickling down to pro-Uribe congressional candidates so far. In a country with no history of coattails, it is not clear whether Uribe's efforts will have the desired effect, particularly with less than two weeks until the March 12 elections (septel).

3. (C) Conservatives Expel La Gata's Son: Bowing to pressure from Casa Narino, Conservative Party President Carlos Holguin expelled Hector Julio Alfonso Lopez, the son of jailed lottery millionaire Enilce Lopez ("La Gata"), currently under investigation for money laundering. This is a departure for the Conservative Party, which had earlier said it would not expel candidates unless there were judicial proceedings against them. Holguin told the press it was a political decision and did not mean there was evidence against Alfonso Lopez or the Conservative Party was judging him. Holguin did say, however, that he thought Alfonso Lopez's inclusion on the Conservative list for the House from Bolivar Department was "inappropriate" from the beginning and fired local Boliviar Conservative Party president Dario Jose Bustillo Gomez. Alfonso Lopez is said to be considering offers to join other parties.

4. (C) Conservative Party Slipping?: Between the two historically dominant Colombian political parties -- the

Conservatives and the Liberals -- the probable loser in this year's elections would appear to be the Conservative party, which is aligned with President Uribe. Even Uribe supporters predict that the Conservatives will lag far behind the Liberals in the upcoming March 12 elections. Most politicians predict the Liberals will garner 30-35 seats in the Senate and 55-60 in the House. Estimates for the Conservatives range from 10-19 wins in the Senate, with a more respectable showing of as many as 30-40 seats in the House. In the current Congress, Conservatives have 24 Senate seats and 46 House seats. Our interlocutors attribute the expected Conservative decline to the lack of personalities and leadership in the party. Despite this potential loss, the Conservative Party still figures to feature prominently in any Uribe coalition and will be important to Uribe in his efforts to pass legislation (septel).

15. (U) The View from the Extreme Left: Jorge Enrique Robledo, a Senator and member of Polo Democratico Alternativo (Polo) who leans to the far left, recently said that Polo's goals are to "defend work and workers, their salaries, the quality of life of all people, and protection for agriculture, industry and business in Colombia." Robledo is opposed to the Colombian-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and prominently displays this on his campaign materials. Robledo noted that "statutes and agreements" are what currently unite Polo and that it will take time to blend the personalities that came together to form the party. He is "optimistic," however, about the left's chances in the congressional elections. He said he hopes Carlos Gaviria wins the Polo primary and defeats Uribe in the presidential race.

16. (C) Elections and Extradition: Leading daily El Tiempo asked 100 of the "most likely" winners in the coming elections if they would support constitutional changes to end extradition. Only 29 of the 100 said they would be in favor of anti-extradition changes. Two thirds said flat out they would not, while about a third expressed varying degrees of support for legislative changes. This parallels with numerous comments Members of Congress have made to us over time.

17. (SBU) Senate Candidate Dies in Helicopter Crash: Pedro Juan Moreno, a leading Conservative Senate candidate and former advisor to President Uribe, died on February 24 when the helicopter carrying him to an election event in Apartado crashed in the mountainous region of Dabeiba, 220 miles northwest of Bogota. Mechanical failure is the probable cause of the crash. In the late 1990s, Moreno was chief aid to Uribe when he was the governor of Antioquia Department. In recent years, Moreno had distanced himself from the President and had accused some Uribe administration officials of corruption in his self-funded publication, "The Other Truth."

18. (C) Shifts in Liberal Party Support: A poll released on February 28 showed the front-runner, Horacio Serpa, slipping from 32 percent to 18 percent in his quest for the Liberal party nomination. Former Defense Minister and current Senator Raphael Pardo rose from 8 to 14 percent. More than 46 percent are undecided, making it anyone's race.

WOOD